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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted by North Shore Community College during 1979 to determine the reasons why students in the Division of Continuing Education drop out of college. During the survey, a randomly selected sample of the 1,706 continuing education students who had been enrolled during Fall 1978 but who did not reenroll in Spring 1979 were asked to check off their principal reason for withdrawal from among eight possible categories listed on a postcard questionnaire. Findings, based on 294 responses, indicated that 33% of the students had completed their program of study; 7% withdrew because of an inconvenient schedule; 6% were unable to finance further education; 1% felt that the instruction was inadequate; 1% found the work more difficult than anticipated; 1% were disappointed in the program of study; and none of the respondents indicated that their main reason for withdrawal was a lack of student support services. Half of the respondents checked off the "other" category, specifying reasons centered around job or family responsibilities; 34 of these respondents indicated that they intended to return to college. The study report reviews the literature dealing with attrition among continuing education students and compares survey findings with reasons for student withdrawal cited in the literature. A bibliography is included. (JP)

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ATTRITION CHARACTERISTICS

DIVISION OF CONTINUING EDUCATION STUDENTS
NORTH SHORE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
BEVERLY, MASSACHUSETTS

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of attrition continues to confront educators in higher education. This is true at all levels, whether it be at the four-year institution, the community college, or for part-time evening students. Though attrition rates have become lower (A.A.C.J.C., 1968 1969) than they were ten years ago, the problem still deserves the attention of educators.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the attrition rates for continuing education students specifically at North Shore Community College in Beverly, Massachusetts. The population will be limited to those students who 1) had enrolled in only credit courses and 2) had successfully completed the courses for which they enrolled. The examination will include the reasons why those students choose not to return to North Shore Community College the following semester. The findings from this study will be compared to other attrition studies that have been done in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on attrition studies for Division of Continuing Education students is relatively non-existent. Although there are many studies on attrition at the two-year college level, these studies generally examine the entire student body and do not separate evening students from day students. One reason for this may be that the majority of community college systems in the United States do not separate evening students from day students when those students are enrolled in credit courses. The Massachusetts Community College system, by law, specifically separates continuing education and Summer division students from Day students, regardless of the nature of the student's program of study.

"Financial reasons have been identified as a major cause for student withdrawal at many institutions, and it is understandable that more part-time than full-time students withdraw (Rowell, 1974)." Financial and personal reasons were most often cited as students' reasons for those part-time students who did withdraw (Moraine Valley, 1973; Santa Fe, 1973).

A study at Miami Dade Community College indicates that students desire a more personalized experience at the Community College and that attrition can be minimized with an increase in both student-teacher and student-administrator contact. With an increased amount of personalized attention, the more students appear to be satisfied with their education, and therefore they remained (May, 1973).

Academic and personal counseling was proven to lower the attrition rate at the Nappa Valley Community College (1971); and it is again mentioned as a factor in the Vancouver City College study (Jones, 1972). Intensive counseling is again cited as a necessary ingredient, and that this counseling should be made available as early as possible to decrease attrition rates (Duby and Giltrow, 1978).

"In a study of the New York State two-year college system, it was found that just less than one-half of the Freshmen do not enroll the next year. The major reason given by the students was dissatisfaction with their area of study and the irrelevancy of their college education. Follow-up studies show that of those who did drop-out, some 40 percent did so in new fields of study (Knoell, 1966).

Academic success and students continuing their education appears to have a direct relationship. Low academic success was identified as one of the major reasons for Freshmen not continuing their education at three Florida Community Colleges (Davis, 1970). At Montgomery Community College, which has a non-punative grading system, Freshmen who were forgiven for low academic achievement to see if "success" would have an effect on returning students during their second year were found to improve significantly and graduated with averages above the middle of their graduation class (White, 1971).

In the Brawer study (1972) it was noted that those students who continued their education at the community college had the ability to tolerate ambiguity, relate to themselves, delay gratification, and have a higher personal identity rating on a "functional potential" scale than those who did not continue their education.

The commitment of the community college to meet the needs of adult students at the basic skill level and to personalize education was noted as the most important step for community colleges to undertake in retaining the adult student. This study also indicated that faculty development, providing instructors with the necessary tools to deal with the adult students and offering flexibility in teaching methods is equally important in lowering the attrition rate of adult students (Browne, 1979).

Recent studies at two Florida Community Colleges, Santa Fe and Lake City (1973), point out that there are more part-time students than full-time students who actually drop-out of school. The Florida Twelfth Grade Test was used as a predictor for potential withdrawers. At Lake City Community College, 66 percent of the students who did withdraw scored below 200 on the state exam. At Santa

Fe Community College, those students who did not graduate had an average score of below 300; whereas graduates averaged a score of 315.

SUMMARY

A summary of the literature reviewed indicates that withdrawals at the community college level can be grouped as self-related and college-related. Self-related factors involve actual and perceived ability, background, and motivation for colleges, as well as family influences and expectations and previous school experiences. The student arrives on campus with these factors already in hand.

College-related factors are those which influence the student after he/she arrives on campus. These factors are the interaction of the student with his peers, faculty, the curricula and institutional practices. Those students who are successful in adapting to these college-related factors are distinguished by their successes in their education.

It is clear that the literature cites many reasons for student attrition at community colleges. It is the responsibility of community college educators to evaluate attrition more closely at their own institutions to get a better understanding as to the reasons students drop-out. It is especially important with the adult population, who comes to college with various backgrounds and expectations, that each student's educational and personal needs be addressed and the institution make a total commitment to serve all of the needs of each student.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to determine those reasons why Division of Continuing Education students at North Shore Community College dropped-out of college after the completion of one semester of course work.

The methodology utilized in this study was a simple questionnaire designed to obtain a response in one of eight categories. The questionnaire was open-ended in that one category allowed for an individualized response. The questionnaire, of post card size, was administered by mail. Participants were selected by random sample.

The purposes for utilizing this instrument were that this question and response categories (see appendix 1) has been tested for validity and reliability through the Florida Community College system. The questionnaire was developed at the Institute of Higher Education, The University of Florida (Tucker, Rowell, 1975). It was felt that utilizing this instrument would increase the likelihood of response returns in that students would be encouraged by the simplicity of the format.

The items utilized in the questionnaire were compared in response to the data obtained in the literature review. Those reasons which most frequently appeared in the literature were utilized to form the appropriate items. The purpose of the open-endedness of the last question was to allow for individualized responses in the event that the other categories failed to identify reasons for dropping-out.

ANALYSIS AND STATISTICAL DEFENSE

The results of this study differed sharply from the data obtained in the literature review. Of the eight response items included in the questionnaire, the greatest majority of responses were limited to two items. These items were: A, "Completed the program or courses for which I was enrolled", received 33 percent of all responses; and H, "Other", received 50 percent of all responses. Neither of these items corresponded to those reasons found in the literature. Reasons stated under the "Other" category were generally focused on other commitments the student was responsible for during the period which the study took place. These other commitments were primarily related to job and family. It is interesting to note that several responses in the "Other" category were related to the student completing the courses at North Shore Community College and intending to transfer or actually attending another institution. In addition to this, 34 of those respondents in this category indicated that they were intending to return to North Shore Community College the following Fall 1979 semester.

Responses to question B, "Disappointed in the program for which I was enrolled", C, "Found the work more difficult than I had anticipated"; D, "Felt the instruction was inadequate"; and F, "Lack of support services, e.g. counseling, tutoring, etc.", were so negligible that it indicates that students do not consider any of these areas as main reasons for dropping out of school. The total number of responses in these categories combined was 11, which was less than 4 percent of the sample (see appendix 2). Category E, "Unable to finance further education"; and G, "Inconvenient schedule", 6 percent and 7 percent respectively, were not found to impact greatly on the students' decisions for dropping out.

A statistical analysis was done to determine the degree of confidence from the data obtained in this study. A well-known statistical formula used to determine degree of confidence based on percentages or proportions of sample size is as follows:

$$N = \frac{Z^2 P Q}{(E)^2}$$

In this formula the Z score is dependent on the degree of confidence according to the following:

90% confidence, Z = 1.65

95% confidence, Z = 1.96

98% confidence, A = 2.33

P and Q can be stated as .5; therefore the formula is stated:

$$N = \frac{1.65^2 (.5) (.5)}{(.05)^2}$$

Therefore, N = 272

- * N = Number to determine degree of confidence
- Z = Z score
- P = Probability
- Q = Probability minus 1
- E = Rate of Error

The total return responses from the questionnaire was 294. The number needed at the 90 percent confidence level is 272. Therefore, statistically, it can be stated with a 90 percent confidence level at the .05 rate or error, that the data obtained are significant.

This is especially important in that the data are representative of the entire group of students (1,706).*

The data obtained does not provide any information regarding students who withdrew during the semester or who had enrolled in courses that are considered "community service" or "hon-credit" (see appendix 3).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this study indicates that the Division of Continuing Education and Community Services at North Shore Community College is responding to the educational needs of those part-time students who are interested in courses which carry college credit. The high percentage of positive responses to the questionnaire indicates that the College is providing a well-rounded program of study with appropriate levels of support services and that students are generally satisfied with this education. Furthermore, the results indicate that students attending North Shore Community College come for a specific program or courses which meet an immediate need for the students and that these needs change from time to time.

It is significant to note that the majority of students have individualized reasons for dropping out and in reality these students more appropriately should be labeled as "stop-outs", as a great many of them intend to return

*This group of students had the following characteristics: Had enrolled in the Fall 1978 semester in credit courses only and completed those courses and did not re-enroll in the Spring 1979 semester.

to North Shore or other institutions as the need arises. It can be safely stated that the Division of Continuing Education need not re-vamp or alter its educational delivery system in an effort to retain students, as the needs of those students are not necessarily degree-related.

IMPLICATION FOR THE FUTURE

Initial data, because they differ greatly from that which are found in the literature, suggest that the attendance patterns of Continuing Education students must be continually examined to provide educators with as much current information as possible. This continual feedback will allow Community College Continuing Education Divisions the opportunity to adapt educational offerings to the real needs of the community.

Survival has been the key element for success in the Massachusetts Community College Continuing Education components. To insure that this survival is maintained, Continuing Education needs of evening students must be viewed in the broadest context. Development of non-traditional programs of study which take into consideration previous learning experiences as well as skills obtained from employment must be considered when developing programs. Efforts to improve the faculty's awareness and understanding of the changing needs of Continuing Education students must be articulated.

Survival of Divisions of Continuing Education cannot rely solely on the needs of part-time students exclusive of those common factors which influence state-supported programs designed for "traditional" full-time students. Discontinuity factors such as energy, inflation, and technology will influence

attendance patterns and will increasingly influence both student needs and their participation in Higher Education programs. Educators must keep updated on these issues and adapt their programs to positively influence the students and their communities.

While "traditional" higher education has come under attack for not adapting to the changing needs of students, Community Colleges, especially Continuing Education Divisions have identified these changes and are responding to these needs. Continuing Education Divisions have taken advantage of their flexibility, adaptability and creativity and have demonstrated that meeting the needs of students does not necessarily mean a lowering of academic standards. Continuing Education administrators are leaders in this area.

"The big growth, educationally over the next 10-15 years will be in adult and continuing education. There are educational needs and requirements at every stage of life. Women 35-40 years of age, are enrolling at the College in increasing numbers. Community Colleges and other institutions need to relate to these and student body make-up is going to be increasingly ambiguous--people can't be classified anymore" (Kellogg Foundation, 1979).

Lifelong learning has been recognized as essential for the society. The opportunity for Community College Continuing Education Divisions to assume leadership in this area is one which should not be lost. The challenge then is to continue to focus on the needs of the community and its constituents and respond to these needs. This challenge includes continued investigation and understanding of the attendance patterns of the part-time students. By viewing college students as consumers of higher education and by altering out-dated educational concepts, Community College Divisions of Continuing

Education will survive and education which is essential for the well-being of the community will take place.

TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

Rank order of drop-out personality characteristics and reasons given for leaving:

Most Often Cited

Money Problems

Conflict of personal values with institution

Part-time vs. Full-time

Lower high school grades and standardized test scores

* * * *

Lack of personalized education (teacher attention)

Academic Problems

* * * *

Lack of backing from home and family

Poor Counseling

Lack of personal commitment

Least Often Cited

Low self-attitude

Drug and alcohol problems

APPENDIX 1

WE MISS YOU!!

North Shore Community College is concerned that you did not register for the Spring, 1979 semester. To help us make your college a better place and to better serve our students, would you please fill out this short postcard and drop it into the nearest mailbox. We have paid the return postage for you. THANK YOU.

* * * *

What was your principal reason for not returning to North Shore Community College? Please check the one which applies to you.

- a. ☐ Completed the program or courses for which I was enrolled.
- b. ☐ Disappointed in the program for which I was enrolled.
- c. ☐ Found the work more difficult than I had anticipated.
- d. ☐ Felt the instruction was inadequate.
- e. ☐ Unable to finance further education.
- f. ☐ Lack of support services, e.g. counseling, tutoring, etc.
- g. ☐ Inconvenient schedule
- h. ☐ Other: Please state _____

APPENDIX 2

WE MISS YOU!!

North Shore Community College is concerned that you did not register for the Spring, 1979 semester. To help us make your college a better place and to better serve our students, would you please fill out this short postcard and drop it into the nearest mailbox. We have paid the return postage for you. THANK YOU.

* * *

What was your principal reason for not returning to North Shore Community College? Please check the one which applies to you.

# of responses	percentage	
97	33	A. Completed the program or courses for which I was enrolled.
3	1	B. Disappointed in the program for which I was enrolled.
5	1	C. Found the work more difficult than I had anticipated.
3	1	D. Felt the instruction was inadequate.
18	6	E. Unable to finance further education.
0	0	F. Lack of support services, e.g. counseling, tutoring, etc.
22	7	G. Inconvenient schedule
146	50	H. Other
294		

APPENDIX 3

NON-RETURNING STUDENTS FALL 1978 SEMESTER

TOTAL non-returning students	3,332
Took credit courses only	1,706
Took non-credit courses only	1,174
Withdrew from non-credit courses	111
Withdrew from credit courses	75
Unknown or included more than one category	266

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